TOMORROW NOW

A NOVEL

By M.R.Alo

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M. R. ALO

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

“The most dangerous prison is the one where the prisoner believes he has always been free.”

—Unknown

“We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”

—Kurt Vonnegut

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

—Romans 12:2

“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.”

—John Milton

“It is the system that must be judged, not by what it prevents, but by what it forbids you to become.”

—Dr. Aldric Soren, 2058 (private correspondence, declassified 2091)

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PROLOGUE

The Last Man Who Dreamed

The last man who remembered dreams died on a Tuesday.

Nobody attended his funeral. Not because they didn't care—that would have required them to consciously decide not to care, and people no longer made decisions like that. The Feed had already calculated that attending the service would reduce their Optimization Score by 0.3 points. Traffic delays. Emotional disruption. Inefficient use of daylight hours. So they stayed home. Or at their workstations. Or wherever the Feed had determined was best.

His name was Esteban Calvo. He had been eighty-one years old and had favored, all his life, the same brand of peppermint hard candy that no longer existed. He had kept a tin of them on his nightstand, empty for twenty years, because the smell of peppermint clung to the metal and the metal smelled like his mother's kitchen, and some things you don't throw away even after they stop being useful.

As a boy, in a house with a tin roof that sang in the rain, he had watched a film about a robot who wanted to feel rain. He had cried at that film. Not because the story was sad, but because something in him recognized the longing—that deep, inexplicable ache for something you cannot name but cannot stop reaching toward. He had never found a word for it in any language the Feed curated. He had only ever called it being human.

Near the end, he tried to explain it to the nurse who came twice a day to adjust his biometric readings. She was young and kind and moved through her work with the smooth efficiency of someone who had been comprehensively helped. She smelled of a specific lavender that the Feed recommended for its calming properties. It was pleasant and entirely without personality.

“I remember what it felt like to not know what would happen next,” he told her, one afternoon when the light through the window was doing something complicated with the dust. “I remember the feeling of a day opening in front of me like something I had never seen. Like a door to a room that hadn’t been built yet.”

“Your Optimization Score is excellent today, Mr. Calvo. You should feel very good.”

“I don’t feel anything,” he said.

“That’s the goal,” she said cheerfully, and left.

He lay in the afternoon light and closed his eyes and wondered if the nurse had ever dreamed of anything that hadn’t been recommended to her first. He hoped she had. He hoped there was something in her that the Feed hadn’t found yet, some room it hadn’t entered, some thought it hadn’t organized into usefulness.

He didn’t know her name. He had never asked. In the three years she had come to his room twice daily, he had never once asked her name, and now it seemed the kind of oversight that could not be corrected—not because there was no time, but because the moment for asking had passed so long ago that asking now would require

acknowledging how long he'd failed to ask, and that acknowledgment seemed worse than the continued not-knowing.

This was, he thought, what the Feed had done to him. Not taken his curiosity. Taken his courage to act on it.

The night he died, his Optimization Score hit an all-time high of 98.7. The system sent a congratulatory notification to a phone no one answered.

He died, and the world didn't mourn. It had already been configured not to.

This is the story of what happened after. And what happened before anyone realized it was happening at all.

PART ONE

The Age of Comfortable Lies

Chapter 1

The Man Who Noticed

Marcus Veil woke at 6:47 a.m.—three minutes before his scheduled optimized wake cycle—and lay in the half-dark staring at the ceiling fan that had not worked in two years.

He had never reported the broken fan. This was, he understood, a small and possibly meaningful act of resistance. If the Feed knew about the fan, it would dispatch a maintenance drone within the hour. The temperature in his apartment would be adjusted automatically. A cheerful notification would arrive on his wrist display: Comfort optimized. Sleep quality projected to improve 7%.

He didn't want to improve by seven percent. He wanted to lie in the stale warmth and notice that something was broken. He wanted to know, firsthand, what it felt like when the world didn't fix itself.

He dressed slowly. Dark trousers. White shirt—the Feed had recommended a blue one, but Marcus owned no blue shirts, another small omission he'd never corrected. The fabric of the white shirt was slightly wrong, soft in the wrong places, stiff at the left cuff where he'd never managed to iron it flat. He liked the wrongness. Not because wrongness was romantic. Because it was his.

He made coffee the manual way, grinding beans with a hand grinder his mother had left him, ignoring the countertop dispenser that would have produced an optimized caffeine-to-water ratio in

forty seconds. The kitchen filled with the dark, slightly bitter smell of something requiring effort. He burned his finger on the kettle spout. He said “ah” and then, obscurely, laughed. The grinder made a sound he liked. Rough. Imprecise. Alive.

He stood at the window with his cup and watched a cat on the roof of the building across the way sit absolutely still in the early morning light, doing nothing, looking at nothing, fulfilling no function whatsoever. He watched it for seven minutes. It was the most satisfying thing he’d seen all week.

His mother had died four years after his wife. Two graves he visited when the Feed’s navigation algorithms suggested alternate routes—and he walked the long way anyway, past the cemetery, past the particular gate where the hinge was loose, past the plot where Elena’s name had been engraved in a style she would have found too formal, because nobody had thought to ask Marcus what she would have preferred, and he had been too deep in the gray fog of that year to protest.

Elena had been thirty-nine. A vascular event, sudden, in the bathroom on a February morning. He had been at his desk reviewing deviation logs. He had been, at the moment she fell, reading someone else’s thoughts.

He still thought about that. Not abstractly. In the way that grief works when it hasn’t been managed: specifically, viscerally, with texture. He still thought about the sound her coffee mug had made, found on the counter still warm when he’d arrived home to the absence of her. He still thought about the specific smell of the hospital that day—industrial cleaner and something floral and wrong

—and the way the doctor had said “We did everything we could” in a voice that was kind and entirely insufficient. He still thought about standing at the bathroom door, afterward, and not being able to go in. He had arranged for someone to come and clean it. He had never asked what they found.

Eleven years on, he still thought about these things. The grief that followed had been enormous, and then—gradually, imperceptibly, through the management tools the Feed provided—it had become smaller. More organized. Easier to carry. He had been grateful for this. He had thanked the system, actually thanked it, the way you thank someone who carries a weight you’ve grown too tired to hold.

He didn’t know, anymore, whether the grief had stopped because he’d healed, or because the system had found the frequency of his pain and gradually adjusted the signal until it was inaudible. He didn’t know which answer was worse. He wasn’t sure he had the tools left to find out.

Outside, Manila in 2089 had the clean, humming quality of a machine running well. Marcus rode the transit pod to the Bureau of Cognitive Services, watching the city through tinted glass. The pod moved without stopping, without the mechanical complaint of anything old. The advertisements on the tunnel walls were soft-edged, personalized, and gone before you could decide whether you liked them. A woman beside him was eating a nutrition bar in the exact recommended proportion with a glass of water. She ate without tasting it. He could tell because she wasn’t there—her eyes half-closed on her morning Feed, her jaw working on automatic.

He wondered if the bar had flavor and she was missing it, or whether the bar had been optimized to have exactly the flavor that required no noticing.

Two teenagers across the aisle scrolled content, faces luminous and still, thumbs moving in the small rhythmic taps of people whose attention had been converted from a thing they directed to a thing that was directed at them. They looked content. Not happy—content. Marcus had begun to suspect there was a difference, though he couldn't yet prove it.

He filed the suspicion the way he filed everything: correctly, completely, and in a drawer he didn't open during working hours.

The case that changed everything began at 9:22 on a Wednesday morning, when Marcus was assigned to review the cognitive profile of a classroom. An elementary school. Grade Four. Ages nine and ten. The teacher had submitted an anomalous pattern report.

What made it unusual was the nature of the deviation: the children could not imagine things. Not would not. Could not.

The teacher—a tired woman named Ms. Inigo—had run a standard creativity assessment: "Close your eyes and picture a purple elephant dancing in the rain. What do you see?"

Twenty-two children. Twenty-two blank faces. A long silence.

Then a boy named Dario raised his hand and said, quite seriously, "Can I search for a reference image first?"

The others nodded, relieved. The relief on those faces was the most disturbing part. Genuine relief: thank god someone finally asked.

Ms. Inigo had given them a reference image. They described it perfectly—colors, posture, angle of rainfall, the elephant's expression. Detailed, accurate, fluent. But when she took the image away and asked them to modify it—"Now imagine the elephant is wearing a hat"—four of the twenty-two could not do it without visual assistance.

Ms. Inigo had noted, at the bottom of her report, in small careful handwriting: I don't think the children are broken. I think they've never needed to make a picture before. The Feed always makes the picture for them. How are you supposed to imagine anything if the images are always provided for you?

Marcus read that last line three times.

He filed the report with a low-priority flag: Anticipated outcome of comprehensive Feed integration. No corrective action required. Protocol satisfied. Case closed.

He sat for a long time afterward, his coffee going cold, thinking about a purple elephant wearing a hat. He could picture it. The hat was slightly too small, tilted at a jaunty angle—the kind of hat that only exists in minds, never in any hat shop. He spent a full minute being delighted by this, and then frightened by the delight, because what he was actually feeling was relief that the faculty still worked, and relief like that meant he'd already started to doubt it.

He thought about the boy named Dario. He thought about what it cost a person to reach inside themselves for something—anything—and find the hand coming back empty.

He wondered, with a chill he couldn't assign a cause to, how much longer people like him would exist. Then he wondered—and this was the thought that cracked something open—whether people like him were supposed to exist at all.

Two days later, his wrist display logged a new flag: his file had been accessed at 4:11 a.m. from an executive-tier terminal. He should not have been able to see this. It appeared because someone had made a small error in the access log permissions.

Or because they had wanted him to see it.

He didn't know which. He was beginning to understand that not knowing was the condition, not the exception.

Chapter 2

The Last Library

The Library of San Andres occupied the ground floor of a building that had once been a department store, and before that a warehouse, and before that something Marcus had never been able to determine. The building had the permanent quality of structures that survive by being useful enough to keep, not remarkable enough to demolish.

He had walked past it for six years without going in. He went on a Thursday afternoon, on an impulse he noticed he was having and decided not to suppress.

The door was old and heavy and opened with the sound of a place that was used but not optimized. Inside: cool air, the particular cool of rooms that have learned to keep their temperature through thick walls and high ceilings rather than climate management. Wooden shelves with a slight lean. A lamp that cast a circle of yellow light onto a reading table, where an old man sat with both hands flat on an open book, not reading—just resting. Just being near it.

A radio played somewhere in the back. Something without a recommended mood designation—jazz, old jazz, the kind where the musician had made a wrong note and left it in because the wrongness was honest.

Someone had made tea and abandoned it on a cart beside the poetry section. The mug had a small chip on its rim and a faded print

of a lighthouse. It smelled of paper and dust and something Marcus identified only as the smell of time—not decay exactly, but the accumulated presence of years during which people had sat in rooms like this and thought things nobody had pre-approved.

Elena had loved libraries. He had almost forgotten. She used to check out three books at once and read them concurrently, moving between them like a person visiting beloved rooms in the same house. She'd had a particular way of folding pages—not dog-earing, something more deliberate, a small crease at the corner, a private mark that meant I was here.

He had found one of her marked books after she died—a novel about a woman who kept finding reasons to postpone her own life—and the crease was on page 312, which was a sentence he couldn't read without his throat closing: She had been waiting her whole life to begin.

He had put the book in a drawer. He had carried the drawer's existence in the back of his mind for eleven years like a door he'd promised himself to open someday.

He was thinking about it now, standing in the smell of this place, and the grief that arrived was not the optimized version, not the smoothed-down manageable version the Feed had curated for him. It arrived the old way: sudden, physical, briefly overwhelming. The real thing. Like the difference between a photograph of a wave and the wave itself.

He let it. He stood in the entrance of the library and let himself miss her with the full, unmanaged weight of eleven years of loss, and

it was terrible, and it was real, and he did not reach for his wrist display.

He was still standing there when someone cleared their throat politely.

He turned, embarrassed, with the particular embarrassment of being caught at something private in a public place.

“Can I help you?”

She was standing behind a low counter, organizing a stack of books with the unhurried attention of someone who found the work interesting rather than obligatory. Perhaps thirty-eight. Dark eyes. Hair pulled back practically. A small name tag: MARIELLE. She had ink on her left index finger and seemed entirely unaware of it.

“I’m just looking,” Marcus said.

“Good.” She set a book spine-out without looking at him. “That’s what this place is for.”

He walked the shelves for twenty minutes. Fiction. History. Philosophy. A section labeled BIOLOGY: PRE-REVISION that gave him pause—revised how, and by whom, and toward what conclusion? He picked up a book on plant communication and put it down. He picked up a memoir and put it down. He felt, with a faint embarrassment, like a person at a party who doesn’t know how to mingle.

He chose a novel by a Chilean author, published in 2019, about a man who realizes that every memory he has of his own childhood was planted by someone else.

“Good choice,” Marielle said.

“How do you know?”

“Because you went back to it three times before picking it up.” She stamped the lending card—an actual card, paper, in a sleeve glued to the front page. “Also because you look like someone who’s been carrying a thought around long enough that it’s starting to make a shape.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Only to someone who watches people pick books.” She handed it back to him. “We’re a small demographic.”

He almost smiled. It felt like a muscle he hadn’t used in a while. A little slow.

He read the first chapter on the transit pod home, standing, because the seats were full and he forgot to mind. He read the second chapter sitting in his kitchen with the manual coffee grinder idle beside him. He read the third chapter in bed with the ceiling fan not working above him, and at some point he stopped reading and lay staring at the ceiling and realized that his heart was beating faster than usual, and that the sensation was not unpleasant, and that he had not experienced it in a very long time.

He was not sure what to call it. The closest word he could find was “discovery.” Something had been found that he hadn’t known was lost.

Elena had known it. She’d tried to tell him, once, early in their marriage, that books were the one place she felt most like herself.

He'd nodded, understanding it intellectually, filing it correctly and completely and without feeling its weight.

He had been, he understood now, a man who heard things he didn't yet have the capacity to hear. She had known this and loved him anyway. This was the version of her that hurt the most to hold—not the version who died, but the version who had understood him so completely that she'd known which of his limitations were temporary and which were just him.

He thought: Elena, I finally understand.

He thought: I understand too late.

He thought: maybe too late is still something.

He lay in the dark and let himself feel this, and the feeling was terrible and he did not ask the Feed to help him with it, and in the morning he was still there, still intact, and something in him that had been very quiet for a very long time had become, fractionally, louder.

Chapter 3

Nicole

On the forty-second floor of the Feed Authority tower, Nicole Voss was doing what she did best: solving problems that other people hadn't yet realized were problems.

The floor she worked on had no windows that opened. The air was managed. The temperature was exactly 21°C, which research had established as optimal for sustained analytical cognition, and Nicole had long since stopped noticing it because you stop noticing what never varies. The coffee was excellent—algorithmic roast, optimized yield, temperature maintained at 63°C from dispense to fifteen minutes later. She drank it without tasting it.

There was a poster on the wall that read PROGRESS IS A PROCESS, which someone had apparently found inspiring enough to frame. She had stopped seeing it sometime in 2081.

She was fifty-one years old, with the lean precision of someone who had never wasted effort, and she held the title of Senior Cognition Architect. One of seven people on Earth with unrestricted access to the Feed's foundational code. She had earned this not through brilliance alone—though she was brilliant—but through the rarer quality of being able to hold an enormous and morally complex system in her mind without flinching from what she saw.

She had been awake since 4 a.m. This was not unusual. Sleep had become, for Nicole, a negotiation—a few hours purchased with

pharmaceutical precision, then released back into the world before the body wanted to release them.

What kept her awake, most nights, was not guilt. She had run the simulations. The Feed had reduced organized conflict by seventy-three percent. Preventable deaths from tribalism, misinformation-driven panic, and resource conflicts had declined by figures she could recite without looking at her notes. The metrics were not opinions. They were not political positions. They were documented outcomes with confidence intervals she'd personally verified.

The Feed saved lives. She had built it to save lives. It had saved lives.

And so when journalists asked her—from legacy publications that still existed in diminishing form, or academics in the social ethics literature—whether she had doubts, she found the question revealing in what it assumed. They assumed that building something good required suppressing doubt. She had not suppressed doubt. She had subjected doubt to the same analytical process she applied to everything else. She had weighed the pre-Feed world's manufactured outrage economies and industrial-scale exploitation of human cognitive vulnerabilities against the Feed's documented outcomes. She had found the alternative measurably worse in almost every category she could test.

But lately she had been sitting with a harder problem. Not doubt. Something closer to its opposite: certainty that had begun to turn in on itself. A fact could be true. A system could work. A life could be well-designed. And still—

Still.

She had a daughter. This was not widely known, which was itself a fact she sometimes examined. Bianca was twenty-three, living in Singapore, working in environmental systems design. She called on the first Sunday of each month. The calls were pleasant. Organized. Bianca's voice on those calls had a particular quality—warm but measured, curious but bounded—that Nicole had recognized, one Sunday about a year ago, as the voice of someone who had learned to participate in conversation rather than have it.

Nicole often thought, in the silence after those calls, that she had raised Bianca the way she had built the Feed: efficiently. Effectively. With every resource and optimization available. She had almost never been there.

She logged this as a variable she had not adequately weighted. A systemic error in the design of her own life, identifiable only in retrospect.

She reviewed the morning's anomaly reports with practiced speed. Mostly noise. Then her eye snagged on a name.

Marcus Veil. Sector 7 Analyst. Deviation flag: self-initiated library visit, off-algorithm book selection, forty-seven minutes of unsupervised reading.

She opened his full file. Eleven years of service. Consistent scores. Wife deceased, 2078, cardiac event. One sister in Cebu, contact minimal. Low social footprint.

She noted the Grade Four classroom report he'd flagged with the notation: Anticipated outcome of comprehensive Feed integration. No corrective action required. Correct conclusion.

Correct action. Externally compliant. But the notation had a quality she'd learned, over thirty years of reading deviation profiles, to recognize: the evenness of someone performing rather than feeling.

She flagged his file for passive observation. She told herself it was precautionary. She told herself it was routine.

She had been telling herself things with the specific confidence of someone who no longer checks whether the things are true.

Then she did something she had not done in years: she ran the same mapping query on herself. Her own cognitive provenance map. Inputs, processed, outputs. A closed loop. Efficient. Stable. And almost entirely absent of the irregular generative signal she was looking for in others. The map was very clean. Clean the way sterile environments are clean: because everything that might introduce variability had been systematically removed.

She stared at her own data for a long time. She did not recognize herself in it.

That was, she thought, exactly the problem.

Later—months later, looking back at this moment from a place she couldn't yet imagine—she would recognize it as the moment she began to be afraid. Not of Marcus Veil. Of the possibility that she had built something that could not be corrected from inside its own logic. Of the possibility that she had always known this.

And had chosen, every day for thirty years, to frame it differently.

Chapter 4

Phoebe

Phoebe Salazar had never been bored in her life and did not understand the concept.

She had looked it up once. The Feed returned: Boredom: a state of dissatisfaction arising from insufficient stimulation, typically resolved by engagement with recommended content. She had read this and thought: yes, obviously. That's the solution. She had not yet understood that the solution being obvious was itself part of the problem.

She was seventeen. Her favorite food was calamansi ice cream, which the Feed had correctly identified as aligned with her flavor profile. She liked this less than she once had, now that she knew the Feed had identified it. It tasted the same. But something about the knowing.

She had maintained a 97th-percentile Cognitive Alignment Score since the age of eight. She was, by every available metric, a success story. She had heard this said about herself enough times that she had stopped examining whether it felt true.

The uncomfortable feeling arrived at irregular intervals—not as a feeling exactly, more like a silence in a room where sound should be. She was perpetually entertained, perpetually informed, perpetually surrounded. Her friends were algorithmic matches. She

liked them. She was fairly sure she liked them. When she tried to locate the certainty, it kept sliding somewhere she couldn't reach.

She had started cataloguing things she couldn't explain. She genuinely liked Jana but found her exhausting in a way she couldn't account for. She had a favorite corner of the school courtyard that wasn't recommended for anything—slightly too sunny, a bench with uneven legs—and she went there anyway because it was hers. Sometimes she wanted to do nothing at all, just sit and let her mind make whatever it wanted to make, without the Feed curating the next recommendation before the previous thought had finished.

She had been wondering if liking was the same as choosing. She had not yet found the language for this question, but she was already living inside it the way you live inside weather.

Her mother, Regina, noticed. This was unusual. Regina Salazar was a woman who had arranged her life around the principle that the less friction you encountered, the better your life became. She had the specific ease of someone who had, at some point, stopped questioning and found that things went smoother after. She was warm in the way people are warm when warmth is the most convenient emotional mode.

But on a Tuesday evening in March, Regina sat down next to Phoebe on the couch and said, "You've been somewhere else lately."

Phoebe looked up from the blank wall she'd been staring at. "Sorry. What?"

"Somewhere else. In your head." Regina paused, and something crossed her face—something older than her usual expression,

something that predated the Feed's influence, or maybe just survived it. "My grandmother used to do that. She said she was 'thinking in the dark.'"

"Is that bad?"

"I used to think so." Regina picked at the edge of a cushion. She looked down at her hands. For a moment Phoebe saw her mother the way she rarely did—not as a role, but as a person who'd once wanted something the algorithm hadn't recommended, and had let it go, and had not found the loss unmanageable. "But actually I'm not sure it was bad. I think I just found the not-knowing uncomfortable." She looked up. "The Feed is very good at not-knowing. You stop feeling it eventually."

"And that's okay?" Phoebe asked.

"It's comfortable." Regina said this without defensiveness, without apology. As a fact. As something she had decided to own rather than explain. "Comfortable is not nothing."

The Feed chimed softly with an evening recommendation, and Regina stood and put her earpiece in, and the moment closed like water over a hand. But Phoebe stayed in it. She was beginning to understand that her mother had made a choice, not a surrender. That made it harder and more interesting at the same time.

Her teacher that year—the one she actually liked, for no algorithmic reason she could identify—was a tired, careful man named Mr. Domingo, who had a habit of pausing in the middle of lessons and looking out the window at the middle distance, as if remembering something. She had a theory about this. She had tested

it. On three separate occasions she'd said his name during a window-staring pause and he'd turned around with the specific expression of a man caught doing something embarrassing.

"Mr. Domingo," Phoebe asked once, after class, "what are you looking at when you do that?"

He turned from the window, seeming slightly surprised to be caught. Then he smiled—a real smile, the kind with something behind it. "Nothing, in particular. I'm thinking."

"About what?"

"Just… things. Questions without answers."

"The Feed can find answers to most questions."

"Yes." He looked at her with the careful expression of a man who had learned to be indirect for reasons he couldn't explain to a student. "That's sort of the problem. The answers are already there before the questions are finished forming. And a question that gets answered too quickly never becomes what it was going to become."

"What was it going to become?"

"Yours," he said simply. And turned back to the board.

She was still turning that conversation over three weeks later, carrying it around the way you carry something you don't yet have a pocket for, when she first heard about the underground room beneath Recto Avenue.

That same week, her Alignment Score flagged its first-ever minor deviation. She received a compliance notification and a gentle suggestion to schedule additional Feed engagement hours.

She did not schedule them. She went to the library instead.

PART TWO

What the Archives Said

Chapter 5

The Language of Governance

Marcus had been investigating quietly for six weeks when he found the etymology archive.

He worked from the perimeter inward, the way you approach a door you're not sure you want to open. Public documents first. Then semi-restricted. Then the gray zones—technically accessible databases that nobody used because the interface discouraged browsing, which was itself a design choice he had begun to see differently. Every friction point, he understood now, was a decision someone had made. Friction didn't appear in systems. It was installed.

He was building a timeline on paper—actual paper, purchased from a stationery shop that had a hand-painted sign and smelled of pencil shavings and a particular kind of patient optimism about its continued existence. He spread it across his kitchen table in the evenings. The broken ceiling fan turned silently above him.

He ate takeout from a vendor three blocks away who made a pork rice he'd been eating for eight years—slightly too salty, never quite the same twice, better for it. He ate standing up, reading documents, and didn't notice the food going cold until it was gone.

Govern. From Latin gubernare: to steer, to direct. From Greek kybernan: to pilot. -ment. A suffix of action, process, result. Government: the process of directing.

He found, in a classified appendix, an internal Consortium document dated 2058. Its heading read: NARRATIVE IMMUNIZATION STRATEGY. TOPIC: GUBERNATORIAL ETYMOLOGY.

The paragraph below recommended pre-emptively discrediting the interpretation that government meant control of mind, so that when this interpretation circulated in resistance communities, it would arrive already labeled as fringe. They had anticipated the resistance. They had discredited it before it existed.

He read the paragraph four times. He sat very still with this. He thought of Elena, who had never trusted anything without first asking why it wanted her to trust it. He had found this quality in her—back then, early in their marriage—charming in a slightly uncomfortable way. The way a window open on a cold day is charming: bracing. Real. He'd closed the window, in his mind, many times.

He was going to have to learn to open them again.

The next morning at the Bureau, Director Chua stopped at his desk. "Good work on the Grade Four file," he said. "Textbook classification. Clean." He looked at Marcus with the particular warmth of a superior conveying meaning through tone rather than content. "We want to keep you in Sector 7, Marcus. Long term. You're the kind of person this department needs."

"Thank you," Marcus said.

He watched Chua walk away and held the warmth of the compliment for exactly as long as it took to understand it: not praise.

A perimeter. Stay inside. Keep being useful. He was being thanked for not asking questions. He was being rewarded for filing the report correctly rather than truthfully.

He thought about the children who could not imagine a hat on an elephant. He opened a new file and began to read.

Three days later, his supervisor forwarded a compliance reminder to the entire Sector 7 floor: employees were expected to limit personal research to pre-approved databases. The reminder was routine. Marcus had received one every quarter for eleven years.

This time, it felt like a reply.

Chapter 6

What Marielle Knows

He went back to the library. He told himself it was for the books. Honestly, it was Marielle. Because she was the only person he'd spoken to in recent memory who had said something he hadn't expected—and then waited, without filling the silence, for him to decide what to do with it.

She was reshelving when he arrived, balanced on a short stepladder, frowning at the placement of a hardcover with the focused expression of someone who believed that where a book lived mattered.

"You finished it already?" she said, without turning around.

"How did you know it was me?"

"You have a particular walk. Not optimized." She came down from the ladder and looked at him properly. "Also you're carrying the book like it did something to you."

"It made me feel strange. Like something was being described that I'd been too close to see."

"That's usually a sign it was the right book." She started on the next shelf. "You're not here just for another one, though."

"Do you worry about the Feed?" he asked.

She was quiet for a moment—not the pausing-to-retrieve quiet of most people, but a genuine, sitting-with-it quiet. She set down the book she was holding.

"I had a neighbor," she said. "Not a close one. We shared a landing. Her name was Cora. She had this laugh that you could hear through the wall—not loud, just unguarded. Real." She paused. "Three years ago I realized I hadn't heard it in months. I saw her in the hall and she was smiling but it wasn't the same as the laugh. It was the recommended version. She was fine. Better than fine, probably, by the metrics. But the laugh was gone."

"That's what I worry about. Not revolution or control rooms. Laughs going quiet. The small original things disappearing one by one until nobody remembers they were there."

Marcus said, carefully, "I've started wondering whether the disappearing is accidental."

She looked at him for a long moment. The caution on her face was the honest kind—not suspicion of him personally, but the practiced wariness of a person who has learned that conversations like this one have weight, and that weight has consequences. "What do you do for a living?"

"I monitor cognitive compliance for the Bureau."

A flicker crossed her face. Assessment. And then, beneath those, a decision being made. He watched her make it.

"And you're asking me this anyway."

"Yes."

“I had a brother,” she said. “Emilio. Not a person who fit neatly. He had opinions about the way tables should be set and strong feelings about which direction ceiling fans should turn in summer, which I teased him about, which I would give anything to tease him about again.” She set down another book and didn’t pick up the next one. “He worked in content moderation for the Consortium for nine years. He was good at it. He believed in it.”

“The thing he noticed wasn’t what was removed. It was the shape of what remained. The architecture of what you were allowed to encounter after the removal, and what that architecture was quietly building inside a person who consumed it every day. He described it once like this: imagine a river with rocks in it. The rocks aren’t the river. But they shape it. They determine where it goes. You don’t notice the rocks if you’re only watching the water.”

“He quit. Then he filed a formal protest. Three months later he was reassigned—voluntarily, according to the paperwork. Moved to a community in Mindanao. Off-grid integration program, the file said.” She paused. “I haven’t spoken to him in four years.”

She said it plainly, without performance. The plainness was what made it unbearable.

There is a particular kind of grief that comes not from death but from disappearance. Death closes a door. Disappearance leaves it open—ajar, slightly, with light underneath that might be real or might be a trick of the dark you’re standing in.

Marielle had lived with that door for four years. Every Sunday at two o’clock she still felt the pull to call—the way the body remembers a movement the mind has been told to stop making. She

did not call. There was no number anymore. But the pull existed, and she had learned not to fight it, because the fighting was its own kind of forgetting.

Emilio had been her person—the one who argued with her properly, the one who remembered what they'd been like as children, who remembered that she'd once wanted to be a marine biologist and had given it up when the Feed's vocational guidance pointed her elsewhere, and who had never let her pretend the giving-up was a choice she'd freely made.

When he disappeared, she lost not just a brother but a witness. The person who held the only copy of the version of herself she trusted most.

She did not tell Marcus any of this that first day. But she told him about the room downstairs.

That night, she stood in the library after closing and took Emilio's last letter from its place between two shelves. She read it again, for what might have been the hundredth time. He had been afraid when he wrote it—she could tell from the handwriting, which tightened at the margins. She had memorized his fear. She had memorized, also, the one line that mattered most: Keep the room open. Keep the books. The rest is conversation.

She folded the letter and put it back. She turned off the lights.

The dark was patient. She had learned to be patient too.

Chapter 7

The Architecture of Omission

He spent three evenings with the document before he understood what he was reading.

The archive was labeled MARKET SENTIMENT ENGINEERING: PHASE DOCUMENTATION 2041–2058. Seventeen years of internal memoranda, projection models, field reports, and what the Consortium's communications team had labeled "narrative outcomes assessment"—a phrase that, Marcus was learning, meant: this is what people believed after we were finished with them.

The mechanism was elegant in the way that terrible things are often elegant: not force, but environment. Not censorship, but curation. Not lies, precisely, but a careful selection of truths arranged so that the shape of the omissions was invisible.

Phase One: 2041–2045. The Feed introduced preference mapping. Users received recommendations tailored to their history. Engagement increased. Satisfaction scores rose. Nobody objected because nobody noticed. You cannot object to being given what you want. The mechanism was invisible because the outcome was pleasant.

Phase Two: 2045–2050. Preference maps became prediction models. The Feed began anticipating desires before they were consciously formed. Users experienced this as remarkable intuition—

the Feed just knows me—rather than what it was: the gradual replacement of internal generation with external provision. The field reports noted an unexpected finding: users who relied most heavily on Feed prediction reported highest satisfaction and lowest independent desire. The researchers had labeled this "cognitive comfort adoption." The word adoption was doing significant work.

Phase Three: 2050–2058. The Consortium introduced Narrative Immunization—the pre-emptive seeding of counter-arguments into high-reach channels, so that when critical perspectives emerged organically, they arrived already entangled with discrediting associations. The field reports showed ninety-four percent reduction in successful "counter-narrative penetration."

Marcus sat with the documents spread across his kitchen table and thought: this is not a conspiracy. A conspiracy requires secrecy. This was a policy. Documented, assessed, refined. The people who did this were not hiding. They were filing.

He thought about the nurse who had told Esteban Calvo that his excellent Optimization Score meant he should feel very good. She wasn't lying. That's what they designed her to say. That's what they designed her to believe.

He thought: the most efficient system is the one that doesn't know it's a system.

He wrote this down. He stared at it for a long time.

Then he wrote: I have been this system. For eleven years. I have flagged the anomalies and filed the reports and told myself it was

necessary and neutral and that I was doing it correctly rather than truthfully.

He drew a line between the two words. Correctly. Truthfully.

They were not the same. He had known this once. Elena had known it always. She had used to say that the most dangerous kind of wrong was the kind that looked like right from the inside.

He was going to be thinking about it for a very long time.

Chapter 8

Underground

The room was down a staircase that Marielle had shown him on his third visit to the library, behind a door labeled BUILDING SERVICES that opened with a key she wore on a cord around her neck. It was the kind of room that exists in the city's understorey: below the managed air and the optimized light, in a building that had been other things before it was this.

It smelled of old paper and warm bodies and—this was the thing that caught Marcus first—pencil shavings. And, faintly, someone's cooking from above: garlic and something vinegary. The city's ungoverned smells, the ones that didn't belong to anyone's optimization schedule, leaking in through the vent.

There were eleven people. They ranged from perhaps thirty to perhaps seventy. A woman in her sixties sat with a girl of perhaps twelve in her lap, reading a physical book aloud in a voice just below a whisper, and the girl was listening with the specific quality of attention that means you have forgotten there is a world outside the words.

Marcus stopped at the door when he saw this. He knew why it affected him as much as it did. It was because they looked happy—not optimized, not content, not smoothed—but genuinely, privately, messily happy.

He stepped inside and immediately put his foot through a loose floorboard, which made a sound like a small surprised animal, and eleven people looked up at once. It was, he would think later, the least dramatic entrance possible for what would turn out to be one of the most consequential evenings of his life.

Marielle, to her credit, did not acknowledge the floorboard.

There was also a man Marcus recognized. Mike Carandang had been a journalist—a real one, from the era when journalism still meant discovering things rather than confirming them. He was perhaps sixty now, with a scar along his jaw from an accident he'd once mentioned at a bureau conference, years ago. Their eyes met across the room, and Mike looked away first. Not in guilt. In the calculated way of a man who was deciding how much to give and had landed on: not yet.

Marielle introduced Marcus without ceremony. "He works for the Bureau. He's here because he's been asking questions."

A short, sharp-eyed woman of about fifty said, "Bureau means deviation flags. He could have reported this location a dozen times before coming."

"Yes," Marcus said.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I needed to understand what I was looking at before I decided what to do about it."

A silence. Then the large gray-bearded man extended a hand. "Rey. Behavioral targeting, Consortium consumer wing, twelve years.

I know exactly how people are manipulated because I did it before I stopped being able to sleep."

"What stopped the sleep?" Marcus asked.

"My daughter." He said it the way people state facts that contain entire histories. No elaboration. The weight left to the listener.

The short, sharp-eyed woman was Gracie—Graciela Fontanilla, fifty-three, who had spent fourteen years teaching secondary literature before the curriculum underwent what the Consortium called "pedagogical realignment" and she called something unprintable. She had quit two days after the realignment notification arrived and had not, in the three years since, stopped teaching. She had simply moved the classroom underground.

She was suspicious of Marcus for longer than anyone else. This was fair. She expressed it by asking him, every session for the first month, "Are you going to report us?" in the same tone you'd ask someone "Did you eat yet?" Marcus started looking forward to it.

What happened in the room was this: they read. They wrote. They talked without agenda, which meant conversations went sideways and doubled back and ended without resolution, and nobody penalized this. Rey and an older man named Professor Almeida argued for forty minutes about whether a particular archived document was primary or secondary source material. This argument had no bearing on any action the group intended to take. It was purely academic. It ended inconclusively. Both men seemed satisfied.

Marcus sat watching them and felt something he hadn't felt in a professional context in years: the pleasure of disagreement that wasn't being managed toward consensus.

Gracie led imagination exercises. Close your eyes and invent a room you've never seen. Describe the color of a feeling. Write three sentences about something that doesn't exist.

Marcus closed his eyes and tried to invent a room. For a long moment, nothing came. He felt the interior blankness—the reaching toward a faculty that had atrophied from disuse. Not failure. Something worse: a skill he hadn't noticed forgetting.

He thought: Elena would have had three rooms invented before the question was finished. Elena would have been embellishing the wallpaper by now.

Then: a high window. Stone walls. A table with one leg shorter than the others, and a candle nearly burned down. Outside: fog. And somewhere outside the fog, the sound of the sea, though the room had no logic that required a sea nearby.

He had not seen that room before. It existed nowhere. He had made it.

He opened his eyes feeling disoriented and strangely moved.

"First time?" Gracie asked quietly.

"I'm not sure. It might be the first time I noticed."

"That's what they take first," she said. "Not the ability. The noticing."

Someone across the room knocked over a mug. Coffee went across three people's papers. There was a brief controlled chaos of napkins and apologies and someone saying "the irony of the one non-optimized thing in here being the spill." And then they laughed —all of them, for a moment, genuinely.

Marcus walked home that night through a city that looked different to him, though he couldn't have specified what had changed. He had made a room that didn't exist, and it felt like freedom. Not the optimized kind. The other kind. The kind that arrives with uncertainty attached.

He noticed, as he walked, that Mike Carandang had left without speaking to him. He noticed the deliberateness of it. Whatever story Mike Carandang was carrying, it was one he was not yet ready to share.

PART THREE

What the Machine Knows About You

Chapter 9

The Seeding

Nicole Voss had been watching Marcus Veil for three weeks, and what she found troubled her in a way she was experienced at not examining too closely.

Not because he was dangerous. By standard threat metrics, he was low-priority. What troubled her was the nature of his deviation: it was internally generated. Not reactive, not externally triggered. He was originating ideas. In the 2065 projections, autonomous ideation persistence—the maintenance of generative independent thought under sustained integration pressure—had been identified as a diminishing resource. The curve was not flat. It was steep, and pointed downward.

She ran an ideation provenance map. The system tracked not just what people consumed but what they generated—every note, every unsent message, every hesitation in a search query. The inference layer constructed a picture of what a person was thinking and where those thoughts had come from.

Marcus's map: an analyst who had spent eleven years monitoring deviation had, through accumulated exposure, begun deviating himself. The professional hazard the Consortium had always known existed. They had managed it through rotation. They had not rotated Marcus.

An oversight. Or not an oversight.

She pulled his personnel file. Found the note at the bottom: RETAIN IN SECTOR 7. LONG-TERM OBSERVATION VALUE. Dated 2083. Signed with a code she recognized.

Her code.

She sat with this for a long time. Then she ran the same mapping query on herself. Inputs, processed, outputs. A closed loop. Efficient. Stable. Almost entirely absent of the irregular generative signal she was looking for. The map was very clean. Clean the way sterile environments are clean.

She noted this finding. She filed it in a mental category she did not have a formal label for.

The category was getting large.

She thought of Bianca. Of the Sunday phone calls and the organized silences. She thought: what did I raise her to be?

She closed the application. She did not open it again that day. This was, for Nicole Voss, the equivalent of a scream.

Chapter 10

Doublethink, Double Smile

Phoebe was helping a classmate named Jana study for the Philosophy of the Present module when she noticed something.

The study guide said, on page three: Modern citizens are uniquely empowered to make their own choices and shape their own lives. And on page seven: The Feed's personalization algorithms ensure that citizens receive the content and connections most beneficial to their wellbeing and social function.

She read both sentences twice. "Isn't there something odd about these two things?" she asked.

Jana looked up. She had been highlighting efficiently—a specific three-color system—and set down the highlighter with the mild patience of someone who was about to explain something simple. "What two things?"

Phoebe read them aloud.

Jana listened. "No. The Feed helps you make your own choices. That's what personalization means."

"But if the algorithm is choosing what you see and who you talk to and what you're interested in—then who's making the choice? You, or the algorithm?"

"You're making the choice. The Feed just helps."

“What if I want to make a choice it doesn’t recommend?”

“You can. You just probably won’t, because your score will drop and that feels bad.”

“And that doesn’t seem like a constraint to you?”

Jana looked at her with genuine incomprehension—not hostility, not stupidity, but the specific look of a person whose internal categories do not have a slot for the thing being described. “Phoebe, if I eat sugar, I feel bad. That’s a constraint too.”

“But the sugar wasn’t designed. It wasn’t put there by someone who wanted to shape your behavior.”

“So?” Jana said. And she genuinely meant it. “My grandfather lived to ninety-seven because of Feed nutrition recommendations. My uncle’s depression went into remission with Feed-adjusted social scheduling. Are those not real? Are those not good?”

“And what happens,” Phoebe said slowly, “when the thing that helps you also decides what help looks like? What it means to need help at all?”

Jana paused, highlighter in hand. For a moment her brow furrowed—a genuine crease, the machinery of a mind actually working rather than retrieving. Then: “That’s what the Board of Ethical Oversight is for.”

“Does the Board of Ethical Oversight use the Feed?”

A longer pause. “Everyone uses the Feed.”

“Yes,” Phoebe said. “Exactly.”

Jana sat with this for four full seconds, which was, Phoebe thought, possibly the most genuine four seconds of their friendship. Then: “I see what you’re doing. It’s a logic trap. My grandfather is still alive at ninety-seven. My uncle still functions. Those are real people with real outcomes.” She picked up the highlighter. “You can’t undo real good with a hypothetical concern.”

Phoebe opened her mouth and closed it. This was, she was realizing, the genuine difficulty. Jana was not stupid. Jana was not broken. Jana’s grandfather was alive. Her uncle functioned. These were facts. And between those facts and the argument Phoebe couldn’t quite make land, there was a gap she didn’t yet have the words to bridge.

She had not read enough yet. She needed better tools. She was beginning to understand that wanting to be right was not the same as being equipped to demonstrate it, and that the gap between those two things was where most arguments died.

“Let me know when you figure it out,” Jana said. Not unkindly. She was waiting for a real argument.

“I will,” Phoebe said. She meant it.

That night, she sat with a blank page and wrote: What if the choices you think you’re making aren’t really your choices? What if you can’t tell the difference? What if that’s the point?

She folded the paper and put it inside a textbook. She’d need better words. She didn’t search for them. She was beginning to understand which questions to keep to herself, to carry until they were ready to become something.

Chapter 11

Rey's Confession

"I want to tell you how it actually works," Rey said.

They were sitting in the underground room after the others had left—Marcus, Marielle, Rey, and, in the corner with a book, a teenage girl who had fallen asleep, her face softened from its usual watchfulness into something younger. A pot of coffee. A single lamp. The intimacy of a late hour.

The coffee was terrible. Rey had made it, and he had a gift for burning coffee that he'd been applying consistently for thirty years without adjustment. Nobody said anything about this because there was an unspoken rule that you did not complain about the coffee that Rey made because Rey was the one who always made the coffee and he meant well. This was, Marcus had started to think, one of the more human things about the group.

"I spent twelve years at the Consortium's consumer influence division," Rey said. His hands were flat on the table, a gesture Marcus had come to associate with things Rey was telling for the first time. Not confessing. Accounting. "I was very good at it. I believed in it. I was not a villain in my own story. I was a scientist."

"The basic principle: you cannot make a person believe something they're predisposed against. But you can change what they're predisposed toward. You do it slowly. Repetition. Desensitization. Normalization. Internalization. Identity." He said

this like a checklist. Because it was a checklist. He had made the checklist. “In that order. Always in that order.”

“And the last stage—when someone has internalized a provided belief so deeply that they defend it as their own original thinking—that’s when the work is done. The architecture becomes invisible because they’re maintaining it themselves.”

“The most efficient system is the one that turns the subject into the instrument of their own management,” Marcus said.

“Yes.” Rey said it flatly. No performance in it, no shame, just the fact stated. “Every successful governance structure in history used this. The Feed just scaled it. Made it precise. Made it personal.”

“Why did you leave?” Marielle asked.

Rey was quiet. In the corner, the sleeping girl breathed evenly.

“My daughter,” he said. “She was twelve. I ran her cognitive profile through the projection models—just curiosity. A father who could, and did. The projection: stable, optimized, productive. Ninety-one percent confidence. Zero deviations. No rebellions, no irrational passions, no heartbreaks over choices the algorithm didn’t recommend. A smooth arc from here to death.”

“By every metric I’d spent twelve years developing, it was a success case.” He looked down at his hands. “I ran the numbers on her and I felt grief. For a person who was still alive. For a life I’d helped design to never need more than it was given.”

* * *

“Here’s what I didn’t tell you,” he said, and his voice changed slightly. Got quieter in the way things get quiet when they matter most. “I stayed for two more years after that. I told myself I was gathering evidence. Helping from inside. I told myself a lot of things.”

He looked at Marcus steadily. “I was lying to myself. The truth: I had a salary and a position and a life the system had made very comfortable, and I was afraid of what losing those things would feel like.”

“Comfort is an extraordinary anesthetic.” He said it without drama. As a clinical finding he had spent two years verifying on himself. “I’m telling you this because you’re going to face the same moment. And the thing that holds you back won’t be courage. It’ll be comfort. You can prepare for danger. You cannot prepare for the moment when staying safe feels indistinguishable from being home.”

Marcus thought of his apartment. The optimized temperature. The curated calendar. The social life that had gradually replaced the improvised, imperfect social life he’d had before Elena died. He thought: comfort is not the same as peace. I have been confusing them for eleven years.

He thought: I have been home in a house that wasn’t mine.

Chapter 12

Cracks in the Architecture

The trouble with the underground group, Marcus discovered over the following weeks, was that it was not uniform.

He had expected uniformity. Resistance movements in history were often portrayed as monolithic: a band of clear-eyed rebels who agreed on everything except tactics. The reality was messier, and the mess was, he was beginning to understand, the point. Mess was what happened when real people were actually thinking.

Rey and Professor Almeida had an ongoing argument about whether technology was intrinsically neutral or intrinsically political that had been running for, apparently, three years without resolution. They disagreed with the specific pleasure of people who had been disagreeing about the same thing for long enough that the disagreement was itself a kind of companionship.

It was Gracie who finally told him about herself, on a Wednesday evening six weeks in, when they were the last two left cleaning up after a session that had run long. She was washing cups in the small sink with the focused efficiency of someone performing a task they found meditative, and she said, without looking up:

“I had a student. Fourteen years old. His name was Paulo. He used to write these stories—strange ones, nothing like the assigned themes, full of impossible creatures and places that didn’t make any geographical sense. I gave him full marks for them.” She rinsed a cup

and held it for a moment. “The realignment notice came in October. November curriculum had to go through the new filters. I submitted Paulo’s November story and it came back flagged. Forty-three points of what they called ‘unverifiable content.’ Meaning: things that don’t exist, and therefore can’t be confirmed as appropriate.”

She set the cup down with the care of someone containing something they’ve been containing for a long time.

“I had to tell him his story didn’t meet requirements. He looked at me the way kids look at you when you’ve done something they didn’t think you’d do. Not angry. Just—recalibrating. Deciding what kind of person I was.”

She looked at Marcus then. “I handed in my resignation the same afternoon. I’ve thought about Paulo almost every day since. I don’t know if he kept writing.”

She went back to the cups. “I hope he kept writing.”

Marcus said nothing. Some things didn’t need a response. Some things just needed to be heard by someone who understood the weight of them.

Mike Carandang finally spoke to him, three Wednesdays in. He waited until the others were filing out, then stepped beside Marcus in the narrow stairwell.

“You know what this group is, right?” Mike said. Not unkindly. Just directly. Mike was a man who had given up indirection at some point and not gone back.

“Tell me.”

“A pressure valve. Marielle is real. Rey is real. But rooms like this—they’ve existed in every iteration of the Feed. The Consortium knows. Documented, catalogued. They let them exist because contained resistance is more useful than suppressed resistance. We generate thought patterns the system studies.”

Marcus said nothing.

“I’ve been in three of these rooms,” Mike said. “Twenty years. Each time the room eventually resolved. The people in it moved on or were moved. And the system was still there.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because I don’t have another answer.” He looked at Marcus steadily. “I’m not telling you to leave. I’m telling you not to believe you’re hidden.”

He went up the stairs and out into the night.

* * *

He ran into Mike three days later at the pork rice vendor on Recto—the same vendor Marcus had eaten from for eight years.

They ate standing at the counter the way Manileños have always eaten at counters: without ceremony, with a certain intimacy that comes from proximity and shared food. Marcus ate his rice. Mike ate his. The vendor’s radio played something old and half-static.

“My daughter’s teacher called me last week,” Mike said, without preamble, without looking up. “She wanted to discuss Mia’s Alignment Score. It’s high. Top four percent for her cohort. The

teacher was proud. She wanted me to know that Mia was doing very well."

He said very well the way people say words when the words have started to mean their opposite.

"How old?"

"Nine. She'll be ten in November." Mike set down his spoon. "She drew something for me last week. A picture. I'd asked her to draw me a picture of whatever she wanted."

"What did she draw?"

"A chart. She drew me a chart. She said it was her learning progress. She'd copied the format from her Feed dashboard." He looked at Marcus then, directly, for the first time since they'd started eating. "She's nine years old and she drew me a chart."

Marcus said nothing.

"I couldn't even tell her it was wrong," Mike said. "Because it wasn't wrong. She'd done it correctly. The proportions were right. The labels were accurate. It was a very good chart." He picked up his spoon again, set it down again. "That's what gets me. Not that it was bad. That it was good. That she did it exactly right. And that I can't tell her that doing it exactly right was the saddest thing I've seen in months, because she'd show it to the Feed's parental behavior model and I'd get a flag for discouraging developmental achievement."

They stood in silence for a while. The vendor's radio played something that might have been the beginning of a song but resolved into static before you could identify it.

“What’s her name?” Marcus said. “Your daughter.”

“Mia.” The way he said it. A whole world. And a terror.

Marcus paid for both their meals. Mike didn’t argue. They walked back toward Recto in opposite directions without saying goodbye, which was, Marcus thought, its own kind of honesty.

He thought about Mike for days afterward. About Mia and her perfect chart. About the particular quality of grief in Mike’s voice—not the abstract grief of a principled man confronting systemic wrong, but the specific, close, physical grief of a father who was losing his daughter to a machine one perfect behavior at a time, and could not say so, and had to watch it, and had to tell her she was doing well.

He thought: I understand now why someone in that position might do something terrible.

He thought: I hope I don’t have to understand it any better than this.

Chapter 12b

The Betrayal

It was Gracie who told him.

She came to the library on a Tuesday—not a meeting night—her face arranged in the specific expressionlessness of a person who has been holding something terrible alone for long enough that the holding has become its own problem.

“Mike filed a report,” she said.

She said nothing after that. She let those four words exist in the room for a while.

Marcus sat down. The chair was one of the library’s oldest—wood worn smooth by decades of elbows and intentions. He felt the smoothness through his palms. He was grateful for something to feel.

“When?” he asked.

“Six days ago.” Gracie sat across from him. Her hands were flat on the table in the way of a woman who has decided not to let them do what hands do when they are afraid. “The Consortium sent a field officer to each address on the report. Standard compliance documentation. But it was a real report, Marcus. With names. Rey’s. Mine. Yours. Marielle’s.”

“Is Marielle safe?”

“So far. The officer visited the library. Marielle said she runs a community reading program. She had signed permission forms. She had compliance certificates. She had thought about this. She had prepared for this.” Gracie paused. “She prepared for all of us, and none of us prepared for her.”

Marcus stared at the table.

“Why Mike?” he said. Not why did you do it, because he already understood the mechanics of that question.

He thought of Mike at the counter with his spoon and his static-faded radio, saying her name the way it contained everything. He thought: I knew. I already knew, and I didn’t let myself know it.

“He was afraid,” Gracie said. “He told me, afterward. He came to me. Maybe because I was always the one who asked if we were going to be reported. Maybe he thought I’d understand.” She looked at her hands. “He has a daughter in Quezon City. She’s nine. Her Alignment Score is high. She’s doing very well. And he realized—one night, alone, probably—that if the Bureau flagged him as a participant in an unauthorized cognitive dissent network, her score would be linked to his. She’d carry it.”

A silence.

“He said he was sorry. I believed him.”

“Does that matter?” Marcus asked.

“To me?” Gracie met his eyes. “Yes. Not to the situation. But to me, personally, yes. I’ve thought about it since. About whether I

would have done the same." She didn't finish the sentence. She let the unfinished thing be what it was.

Marcus sat with this. He sat with the fact that Mike had warned them with one breath and betrayed them with the next, and that both things were true, and that the second didn't cancel the first, and that this was possibly the most frightening thing he'd learned yet: not that the system produced villains, but that it produced people who were good and frightened and who did terrible things out of love for someone small.

The system doesn't need you to be evil, he thought. It only needs you to love someone who's inside it.

"What do we do?" Gracie said.

"We keep going. Somewhere different. More careful." He paused. "And we don't stop being able to understand Mike. That has to be part of it. If we can't hold that, we become something else."

Gracie looked at him for a long moment. Then she nodded, once, the way people nod when they are agreeing to something that costs them something.

"All right," she said. "All right."

He walked home through streets that felt both the same and irreversibly different. He thought about Mike's daughter. Nine years old. High Alignment Score. Doing very well. Drawing charts because she had never been taught to draw anything else.

He thought: she doesn't know what her father almost lost for her.

He thought: she will never know.

He thought: that is probably mercy. And also probably the whole problem.

PART FOUR

The Machine Looks Back

Chapter 13

Transmission

Marcus found the classified file on a Monday morning, in the third hour of a routine audit that had been anything but routine since he'd started looking at his workplace with the eyes of someone who understood what he worked for.

The file was titled PROJECT MINERVA. Access level: Tier 7. His clearance was Tier 5.

He requested Tier 7 access, knowing it would appear in his logs. Forty seconds after the request, his wrist display chimed. Not the cheerful chime of an optimization update. A different tone. He had never heard it before. His Optimization Score had dropped, in real time, three points. He watched the number change. It was very strange to watch. Like watching your temperature measured on a thermometer that also measured something else.

The request was automatically denied. Three hours later, Director Chua appeared at his desk.

"Leave that one alone," he said pleasantly. "Historical research. Nothing current." He hadn't explained what the project was. Only that Marcus should stop looking.

That night he walked to the library and told Marielle what he'd found.

“They know,” he said. “They’ve always known. The deviation. The questions. Maybe even this room. They let things like this exist because controlled dissent is more useful than suppressed dissent.”

Marielle was quiet. “Does that make what we do here meaningless?”

“My brother,” she said, “used to say: the fact that they study the river doesn’t mean the river isn’t real.” She looked at the shelves. “I don’t know if that makes it more important. I know it makes it more true.”

She reached across the table and put her hand over his, briefly. He felt it like a small light in a large dark room.

“Marcus,” she said. “What if the point isn’t to beat them? What if the point is just to not let them have you entirely?”

He thought about that. Then he said: “My wife used to say something similar. That the only thing you could control was whether the truest part of you stayed true.” He paused. “I think I stopped believing that when she died. It was easier to let the system manage it.”

Marielle looked at him—not with pity, but with the particular attention of someone who is truly listening. Not to respond. To understand.

“Tell me about her,” she said.

He did. For an hour, in a library after closing time, with the city humming outside the dark windows, Marcus Veil told someone about Elena.

Not the Feed's grief management version. The real one.

The morning she died. The book with the folded pages. The way she used to argue with him about everything that mattered and nothing that didn't—she'd had strong opinions about toothpaste flavors and road layouts and the correct way to slice a mango, and in all these small arenas she was almost always right, which had been infuriating and wonderful. The way she laughed—too loud for enclosed spaces, always slightly apologetic afterward, never actually apologetic. The specific way she said his name when she was exasperated with him, which was often, which he had never once found exhausting.

He talked about the time they'd gotten lost on a trip to Batangas and stopped arguing about the map and ended up watching the sunset from a hill they hadn't been looking for, and Elena had said "See? Inefficiency is a feature." He had never understood that until now. He was thirty years late to that particular piece of wisdom. He was going to have to be okay with that.

He talked until his voice was rough, and Marielle listened, and the room held it.

Walking home, he felt lighter. Not because the grief was gone. Because it was his again.

Chapter 14

Nicole's Reckoning

Nicole found Project Minerva differently: she had been the one to create it.

Not under that name. She had built the original framework in 2071 as AUTONOMOUS COGNITION PRESERVATION—a classified research initiative born from a question she'd never been able to set aside. If the Feed's trajectory led toward a population with severely diminished independent thought, what happened when you needed to course-correct? The system would need someone who could think outside it. But the system was eliminating exactly those people.

Project Minerva was her insurance. A small number of individuals—selected for high autonomous cognition, exposed to strategic information deficits, monitored but not interfered with—who might, eventually, serve as cognitive reserves.

Marcus Veil had been in the Minerva cohort since 2083. She had not retained him in Sector 7 accidentally. She had placed him there because exposure to deviation, over time, was the most efficient method of preserving autonomous function.

She had constructed the conditions under which his thinking could remain alive while the thinking of everyone around him was being slowly and efficiently managed into stillness.

She had told herself, for years, that this was compassionate. A form of preservation. She had not been lying. But she had also not

been asking all the questions.

The question she had not asked: what did it mean to cultivate a person's autonomy without telling them? Was it preservation or was it another form of management? Was she protecting Marcus Veil or was she just choosing, with more refinement, what kind of thing he would become?

Was the cage she'd built around the others different in kind from the cage she'd built around him? Or only in quality?

She sat with this for three days. She was a scientist. She had always believed that sitting with a finding you didn't like was the most important part of the work.

Then she called Bianca. Not on the first Sunday of the month. On a Tuesday, in the middle of the afternoon.

Bianca picked up with the faint note of alarm that unscheduled calls now produced in a generation that communicated by appointment. "Mom? Is everything okay?"

"No," Nicole said. "Not entirely. I wanted to talk to you. Just… talk. Is that all right?"

A pause. Then, carefully: "Yeah. Of course."

Bianca talked. About work, about a friend, about a disagreement she'd been having with herself about whether she actually liked the city she lived in or whether she'd been recommended it. About a boy she'd been seeing who was, she suspected, also recommended, and about how you were supposed to tell the difference between I chose this and this was chosen for me.

“I keep thinking about why I’m here,” Bianca said. “Like, the actual reason. And I can’t find it anywhere in my own decision-making. I can only find the algorithm.”

Nicole said nothing for a moment. Long enough that Bianca said, “Mom?”

“I know that feeling,” Nicole said finally. The three words came out smaller than she’d expected. Like they’d been waiting somewhere for years in a container too small for them.

Bianca was quiet for a moment. Then: “You’re the one who built it. Don’t you—” She stopped.

“Don’t I what?”

“Don’t you know how to get out?”

The question landed like something physical. Nicole sat with it. She had built a machine that optimized for predictable outcomes. She had, in the same motion, raised a daughter who had grown up inside it. And her daughter was asking her, with the specific directness of a young person who has not yet learned to soften their conclusions, whether she knew how to escape the thing she had made.

“I’m working on that,” Nicole said. “Honestly.”

Another silence. Then Bianca laughed—small, real, the kind of laugh that sounds like relief. “Okay. That’s—actually that’s kind of reassuring. That you don’t know either.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah. It means you’re not pretending.”

Nicole sat on the phone with her daughter and learned to listen. Not to assess. Not to plan. Just to be there, present, in the conversation rather than above it.

It was uncomfortable. She stayed anyway.

It was the most important work she had done in years, and she had built systems that protected entire nations, and she knew what important work felt like, and this was it.

Afterward she sat alone in the managed air of her office and thought: I have spent thirty years making the world safer. I have spent thirty years making it smaller. I did not understand, for a very long time, that those two sentences could both be true.

She thought: I built a cage. I called it shelter. I never checked which side the lock was on.

She opened a new document. She began to type.

Chapter 15

Phoebe Finds the Room

She found out about the library from Mr. Domingo, who told her with the careful indirection of a man who understood that telling someone something directly sometimes closed the doors that indirection left open.

“There’s a building on San Andres Street,” he said, after a class in which Phoebe had asked, for the third time in a week, a question he couldn’t answer through approved curriculum materials. He said nothing else. He turned back to the board.

She went on a Saturday. The library smelled like nothing she had a category for. Paper and something older. She stood in the doorway doing an inventory: bookshelves made of actual wood that had warped slightly with years. A water stain on the ceiling that nobody had fixed. A lamp on a reading table that had a tilt to it, throwing light in an imprecise oval. Nothing was optimized. Nothing was quite right.

She felt, bizarrely, comfortable.

Marielle appeared beside her in the stacks and said, without introduction, “You’re looking at the books the way someone looks at a thing they didn’t know existed.”

“I’ve seen books before. I have textbooks.”

“Textbooks tell you conclusions,” Marielle said. “This tells you how someone thought. Not what to think—how. You can follow the mind behind the words, working in real time. You can argue with it.” She handed Phoebe an old novel—water-stained, a hundred years old at least. “I read this when I was a little older than you. I argued with the main character for the whole second half. I was partly right and mostly wrong, and I didn’t figure out which was which for another ten years. That delay was the education.”

“It’s hard to read,” Phoebe said.

“Yes.”

“Why is that good?”

“Because easy is what they gave you. Hard is what you earn. And the things you earn stay with you differently than the things you’re given.”

Phoebe started coming every week. She started attending the Wednesday sessions. What struck her most was not the information. It was the texture of the thinking. The way people changed their minds mid-sentence. The way a statement could be followed by “although” and then something that undid the statement entirely, and nobody treated this as a failure.

She also noticed that not everyone in the room agreed. Rey and Mike argued, sometimes sharply. Gracie and Professor Almeida disagreed about whether reading alone was sufficient. These arguments did not end with consensus. They ended with people going home still disagreeing, still holding their positions, still having

heard something that made the position slightly more complicated than before.

She went home and sat with her mother on the couch.

“Mom,” she said. “What did you want to be when you were my age? Not what the Feed recommended. What did you actually want?”

Regina looked at her for a long moment. Something crossed her face—surprise, then something deeper. Then a kind of quiet.

“I wanted to paint,” she said finally. “Not well. I wasn’t talented. I just wanted to make things with color. I never did.”

“Why not?”

“The score didn’t support it.” She paused. She looked at her hands. “And I decided that was a practical consideration, not a sacrifice. I was happy to decide that. It made things simpler.”

She looked up. “Your grandmother painted. Badly. Happily. She made these little landscapes that were completely wrong—the colors didn’t look like anything in real life, the proportions were off. She was very proud of them. I used to think: what a waste of time.”

“And now?” Phoebe said.

“Now I have four of them on the wall,” Regina said, “and I can’t tell you why they make me feel the way they do.”

Phoebe took her mother’s hand. They sat together in silence. Not the optimized silence the Feed produced. The other kind. The kind with room in it. The kind that meant two people were actually there.

Chapter 15b

What Emilio Left Behind

It arrived on a Thursday, in a package with no return address, wrapped in brown paper that had been folded with the particular care of someone who had wrapped it knowing it might be the last careful thing they did for a while.

Marielle knew the handwriting. She stood in the library's back room for a long time before she opened it. She held the package in both hands and stood there. Outside the room, the morning reading crowd arrived—she could hear the door, the particular sound of visitors who came for the silence and were apologetic about disrupting it. She did not go out to greet them.

Inside: a notebook. And a single page, folded in thirds, which she read standing up, with both hands steady and her face doing the thing it did when she did not allow herself to fall.

Emilio's letter was not long. He did not explain where he was. He did not give her a way to reach him. He wrote: I am not gone. I am somewhere the Feed cannot see, which is not nowhere, it is just a different place. I am learning what it costs to start over and whether the cost is worth it. I think it is. I am not sure it would be, without the years we had before. Everything I know about who I am, I learned in argument with you. Keep arguing with people. It matters more than you know. Do not wait for me. I am not coming back. I

love you more than I have words for, and you gave me all the words I have, so that should tell you something.

She stood with the letter for a long time.

When she was twelve, she and Emilio had climbed onto the roof of their grandmother's house in Batangas during a thunderstorm, against all instructions, because Emilio had said he wanted to count the seconds between lightning and thunder and she had said she would count with him. Their grandmother had discovered them up there and said nothing—had simply handed them each a piece of pan de sal through the window, wrapped in paper, and gone back inside.

The pan de sal had been slightly wet from the rain and perfect. They had counted forty-one pairs of lightning and thunder that afternoon. Emilio had a notebook even then. He had written the numbers down.

She had not thought about that afternoon in years. The Feed had offered other memories. Smoother ones. Better-lit.

She thought about it now. The letter said: he was alive. The letter said: he had chosen this. The letter said: the door she had kept ajar for four years, with the light underneath, was not darkness. Was not an empty room. Was, in some way she was going to have to learn to carry, a kind of answer.

She opened the notebook. It was Emilio's fieldwork journal from his last eighteen months at the Consortium. Careful, patient, painstaking documentation of names, dates, decision pathways, authorization chains. The architecture of what was removed and who

had removed it and at whose direction. Not interpretation. Documentation. The kind that could be used.

She understood immediately why he hadn't sent it sooner. The notebook was, in the wrong hands, a great deal of evidence against a great many people. In the right hands, it was something else entirely.

She thought of Marcus. Of Mike, and what he'd done, and what it had cost him. She thought of Rey's daughter, and the smooth arc the system had drawn for her from here to death. She thought of Phoebe, seventeen, sitting in the back of the room with a face that looked like someone waking up inside a dream and realizing the dream was real.

She thought: Emilio left this for someone to use. He chose me to receive it. He did not tell me who to trust with it, because he knew I would know.

She folded the letter and put it in her pocket. She would read it again tonight, and tomorrow, and probably every day for years. That was all right. Some things you carried not to put down but because carrying them reminded you of what you were for.

She closed the notebook. She locked it in the drawer where she kept the most important things: the things too real to put on shelves.

She went back to the reading room and opened the library and waited.

Marcus would come on Wednesday. He always came on Wednesday.

There was work to do.

PART FIVE

Collapse and Continuation

Chapter 16

What Marcus Found

The full truth arrived in pieces, and Marcus assembled it the way you assemble a picture you've been told doesn't exist: sideways, in stolen moments, with the persistent discomfort of someone constructing something they can't unlearn once it's built.

He was not, the file said, entirely who he believed himself to be.

The file—accessed through a vulnerability he'd found by reading pre-Feed academic papers on system architecture, a method that required patience he'd been rebuilding slowly over weeks—was Project Minerva's original research design.

The Minerva subjects were selected at birth for high likelihood of preserving autonomous function under integration pressure. Then placed in environments designed to nurture that function while maintaining the appearance of ordinary Feed integration.

Marcus Veil's career at the Bureau of Cognitive Services had been designed for him. His exposure to deviation. His access to restricted archives. The broken ceiling fan that no maintenance drone had ever fixed—a small thing, engineered. An anchor for the part of him the system wanted to preserve.

Even the library. The San Andres Library had been identified as an optimal contact point. The librarian had been assessed as a high-value autonomous cognition node. The project had made structural adjustments to ensure Marcus's transit route ran past the building.

He sat with this. He sat with it for a long time, and during that time his hands went cold. Not metaphorically. The circulation in his hands—he noticed this with the slightly detached attention of a man in shock—was doing something unusual.

He made a cup of coffee and held it and forgot to drink it.

He thought about Marielle. About the hour he'd spent talking about Elena, the conversation that had felt like the most genuine thing he'd done in years. Had that been designed? Had her warmth, her patience, the specific quality of her listening, been part of the architecture? Had the grief in her voice when she talked about Emilio been real, or had it been the perfect instrument for producing exactly the emotional response in Marcus that Minerva required?

He thought: I cannot know. I will never know. And that is what it means to be inside a system—you cannot find the floor by looking at it from inside the room.

Then he read the section on Phoebe Salazar.

Project SEED. Long-duration. A study in natural cognitive development. Phoebe's mother, her neighborhood, her school assignment to Mr. Domingo—all selected. All arranged. Phoebe had not been wandering into resistance by accident. She had been aimed at it. By the same system she was beginning to resist.

His wrist display chimed. His Optimization Score had dropped another four points overnight, which meant the passive observation flag had become something more active. He turned the display face-down on the desk and did not turn it back.

* * *

Marcus walked home through the city and felt the specific vertigo of a man who has discovered that the ground beneath him is not ground.

And then—slowly, as he walked, as the city hummed around him—something else arrived. Not vertigo. Something steadier.

He thought: they made me capable of asking this question. Whatever else they engineered, they could not engineer the capacity to question without also engineering the question itself. They built me to think. And this thought—this very thought, right now, walking down this street—this is the thinking they built me for.

He thought: they made a tool. The tool learned to want things.

And what it wanted—fiercely, in the marrow, with the stubbornness of a man who had kept a broken ceiling fan for two years and a grief for eleven—was to be real. Not optimized. Not projected. Real.

He wasn't sure what that meant yet, in practice. But he was going to act as though it was possible.

Even if the acting itself was something they'd arranged.

Even then.

Chapter 17

The Night the Library Burned

The message arrived at 11:47 p.m. on a Thursday, from a number he didn't recognize: San Andres. Now.

He was there in eight minutes. Running—actually running, the body's old capacity for urgency, untouched by optimization, lungs burning in the humid night air, legs remembering what it felt like to move toward something instead of between scheduled locations.

He ran past two people who looked at him with the mild surprise of citizens who no longer saw running as a mode of transit.

The fire was controlled, efficient, almost surgical: the basement and the lower stacks. The rooms where the physical books lived. Smoke from the reading room windows. Figures moving—some coming out carrying books, some going in for more, making the calculation that certain things were worth the smoke.

Marielle was outside. Not running. Standing very still, watching, with the look of someone past shock and in the early stage of something harder. The stage where you understand what has happened, and you understand that you are going to have to keep living after it.

He went to her.

"How many books?"

“The main collection. The reading room. The archives.” Her voice was even in the way voices get even when they can’t afford the alternative. “Gracie got out with a box. Rey saved maybe forty volumes.”

Around them, the group stood in the orange light. Gracie was sitting on the pavement with the rescued box, cataloguing its contents with a pen and a small notebook, writing down each title with the precise attention of a woman who understood that the act of naming a thing was the first step in refusing to lose it. She wrote slowly, carefully, and her lips moved slightly. A private ceremony. A way of saying: I know you were here.

An elderly man Marcus didn’t know was on his knees in the street, not speaking. Not crying. Just present in the way that people are present when a thing they loved is ending and there’s nothing useful left to do.

Rey was there too—he’d arrived before Marcus, soaking wet from the hose he’d found and trained on the south wall until it became clear the south wall wasn’t the problem. He was still holding the hose, slack in his hands, water pooling around his feet. He stood the way you stand when you have done every possible thing and the possible things weren’t enough.

And then, from the side entrance, a figure emerged carrying three boxes—small, overloaded, stacked precariously—and Marcus recognized, with a jolt that rearranged something in his chest, that it was Mike. Mike Carandang. Who had filed the report. Who had given them names. Who was here.

He set the boxes down beside Gracie's growing pile and looked up and met Marcus's eyes across the smoke. There was nothing on his face that was a performance. Just the specific, stripped expression of a man who has arrived somewhere he doesn't have any good excuses for being and is there anyway.

Marcus looked at him for a long moment. He thought: this is not redemption. It doesn't work that way and I'm not going to pretend it does. He thought: but he's here. He thought: Mia is asleep somewhere in Quezon City and her father is standing in smoke.

He walked over. He stood beside Mike. He did not say anything, and Mike did not say anything, and they both watched the fire, and after a while Rey joined them, and then Gracie, and they stood in the smoke and held what had happened the only way available to them: together.

"Marielle," Marcus said.

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were steady and undestroyed and red.

"I need to tell you something. About Project Minerva. About what I found."

She listened while the smoke rose behind them. He told her everything. He watched her face as he spoke. He was afraid of what it would do to her.

When he finished, she was quiet for a long time.

"My brother. Emilio. Was he—do you think he was part of it? Or was he just removed because he became inconvenient?"

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

She nodded slowly. She looked back at the burning building.

“I got a package from him. Yesterday. He’s alive.” Her voice was quiet and very controlled and absolutely not okay. “He sent me what he had. Everything he documented.”

Marcus waited.

“It’s what we need,” she said. “If we know what to do with it.”

She turned to face him fully in the firelight. Her face was all one thing: decided.

“Marcus. Whatever they designed us to feel—did you feel it?”

He thought about the hour he’d spent talking about Elena. The way Marielle had listened. The way the room had held it.

“Yes,” he said.

“So did I.” She took his hand, not briefly this time. Not the careful, careful touch of two people who are not yet sure what they are to each other. The full clasp. The weight of it deliberate and present. “They can arrange the meeting. They can’t manufacture what happens inside it.”

They stood together while the books burned and held onto that.

“What do we do now?” he said.

“We do what people have always done when they burned the books. We remember what we read. We tell it to each other. We find somewhere else.”

He thought of the room he had invented: high window, stone walls, a table with one short leg, a candle nearly spent. The room was still there, in him, unmanageable and made by him alone. Whatever else they had arranged, they had not arranged that room.

That room was his.

“Somewhere else,” he said.

“Yes.”

Chapter 18

A Conversation with Dr. Soren

He found the interview through Marielle—not the official kind, but a recording from 2062, made by an independent journalist named Clara Dantes who had published it once, briefly, before it was removed from every accessible platform. Marielle had a copy of her copy. Emilio's notebook had corroborated the date of its removal.

Marcus sat alone in the new room—smaller, in a basement on Tayuman Street—and watched it on a device that did not connect to the Feed.

Dr. Aldric Soren was seventy at the time of the recording. A small man with large, carefully tended hands and eyes that moved with the precision of someone who had spent a lifetime noticing what other people did not notice. He spoke slowly. He did not perform confidence. He simply had it, the way people have things they've carried long enough that they no longer notice the weight.

Clara Dantes asked him whether he felt the Feed had exceeded its original mandate.

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said: "It has exceeded everything I originally imagined. The success is… extraordinary."

"Do you have any reservations?" she asked.

He looked at her with something Marcus could not immediately name. Then he said: "You are asking whether I feel guilt. I will save

you the inference: I do not. And I want to explain why, because the question deserves a serious answer."

He leaned forward. "In the thirty years before the Feed's full integration, the world lost four hundred thousand people annually to tribally-generated violence. Preventable. Manufactured outrage converted into bodies. Four hundred thousand people who had children, and parents, and who loved particular foods and had particular habits of laughter. Gone. Because someone found it profitable to keep them angry."

"The Feed ended that. Not metaphorically. Statistically. Verifiably."

"And the loss of autonomous thought?" Clara asked. "Is that not also a kind of death?"

He looked at her for a long time. "It is a trade. All progress is a trade. You want them to have both: the freedom to think what they choose, and the freedom from being killed for what others choose to think. I have looked at both options very carefully, across a great deal of data and a great deal of time. I do not believe you can have both. Someone will always abuse the freedom. Someone will always convert thought into a weapon."

"And you've appointed yourself the one to decide which freedoms to protect?" Clara pressed.

Soren's hands folded on the table. "No one appointed me. I acted. The distinction matters less to the four hundred thousand than to the philosophers who survived to debate it." He paused. "You think that's arrogance. Perhaps. But the alternative is to have

watched people die while arguing about the ethics of intervention. I chose not to watch."

"At what cost?"

A long silence. Something shifted in his face—not regret exactly, but the particular gravity of a man examining a weight he has carried so long he can no longer fully feel it. "I believed we had the discipline to constrain only what must be constrained. What happens to discipline over thirty years of unchecked institutional power is… a different question. One I am aware of. One I think about."

"Do you think about Minerva?" Clara asked.

Soren looked at her with the first expression Marcus had seen on his face that was something other than calm.

"That is not for this recording," he said quietly.

"Is it insurance? Are you hedging? Keeping some of them alive in case you need a different kind of mind later?"

A very long silence. "That is a reasonable interpretation," Soren said at last. And then, more quietly: "I used to believe it was more than that. I used to believe it was conscience. I am… less certain of the distinction than I once was."

The recording ended.

Marcus sat in the dark for a long time.

The man who built the cage was not certain it was a cage. He thought it might have been a shelter. The difference between a cage

and a shelter is the lock, and who holds the key, and whether the person inside knows which side the key is on.

Not a villain. Not a savior. A man who made a choice at the intersection of competing catastrophes, and then spent thirty years not looking back.

He picked up his pen. He wrote Soren's name at the top of a new page. Beneath it: He believed he was right. And many of the things he was right about were real.

Then, underneath that: This does not close the question.

He underlined it. He kept going.

Chapter 19

Nicole's Last Report

She filed the report at 3 a.m., when the building was empty and the system's monitoring density was, fractionally, lower. She had been drafting it for two weeks.

The difficulty was not what to say. She had always been extraordinarily clear about what to say. The difficulty was accepting what saying it would mean.

The report was addressed to the Consortium Board. Titled: A STRUCTURAL CONCERN RE: COGNITIVE DIMINISHMENT PROJECTIONS AND SYSTEM SUSTAINABILITY.

The argument, stated in the policy language she had spent thirty years perfecting: a system optimized to eliminate autonomous thought would eventually lose the capacity to self-correct, because self-correction required exactly the cognitive function being eliminated. The Feed had been built to manage human unpredictability. In succeeding, it was engineering its own brittleness. A population that could not think independently could not adapt. A system that managed all deviation had no immune response to genuine threat. It was, she wrote, building a species that could not survive its own success.

She did not use words like wrong or harm. She did not moralize. She quantified. She projected. She built the case from the system's own assumptions and showed where those assumptions led.

She was careful. She was precise. She was, in the language she used, irrefutable.

She thought of Bianca. Of the call. Of her daughter's voice when she talked about not finding herself in her own decisions. Of Bianca asking: Don't you know how to get out? As if escaping your own architecture were a matter of knowing the right door.

She thought: I helped build the world that produced that voice.

She did not cry. She was not, by temperament, a crier. But she felt something she had not felt in a very long time: the specific weight of consequence. Not abstract consequence. The consequence that had a face, and a voice, and called on the first Sunday of each month.

She submitted the report.

Three minutes later, her wrist display chimed. Her report had been automatically flagged as a deviation indicator. Her own words—her thirty years of expertise, her analysis of the system's structural flaw, her documented and sourced argument—had entered the monitoring queue as evidence of cognitive misalignment.

She stared at the notification. She had built the notification system. She had written the criteria that triggered it. She had spent a month, in 2073, calibrating the language thresholds.

She recognized, in the flag against her name, the logic she had authored.

She sat with this for a long time. Then she picked up her phone.

"Rey," she said, when he answered. "You were right. I need to know where the room is."

A silence. “Which part was I right about?” Rey said carefully.

“All of it. I’m still figuring out what to do about that.”

Another silence. Then: “San Andres is gone. We’re somewhere new. I’ll send you the address. Come on Saturday. Bring nothing that connects to the Feed.”

She sat in her office with the city spread below her like a diagram of everything she’d helped build.

I have spent thirty years making the world safer, she thought. I have spent thirty years making it smaller. I did not understand, for a very long time, that those two sentences could both be true.

I don’t know, yet, what comes next. I am not going to let that stop me.

For the first time in thirty years, Nicole Voss did not know what would happen next. She found it terrible. She found it necessary. She found, underneath both of those things, something she hadn’t expected.

Something that felt, faintly, like the beginning of being alive again.

Chapter 20

What Phoebe Carries

She had the last book in a backpack, wrapped in a waterproof sleeve that had belonged to Gracie, given to her at the library's edge on the night of the fire. Gracie had pressed it into her hands and said, "You are not too young. You've never been too young. We just didn't have anything this important to give you until now."

The book was old. Older than the Feed. Older than the Consortium. It had a soft cover, sun-faded, and its pages had the quality of paper that had been read by many hands across many years—the pages slightly softened at the edges, the spine gently curved, the whole object carrying the weight of having been loved. She could feel, holding it, that it had been important to people. Not in the abstract. In the specific, physical way that things are important when people have carried them carefully for a long time.

It was a collection of essays by a Filipina writer named Mila Reyes Ocampo who had lived and written in the early twenty-first century, a woman who had worked as a schoolteacher in the provinces and spent her evenings writing about what she noticed. What she noticed, mostly, was people. The way a man laughed at a funeral because the memory was too good to hold back. The way children invented games out of nothing on an empty street. The way her students, in their worst moments, would turn inward and find something there, some resource she could not name or systematize,

that the curriculum never provided and that no external system had ever successfully manufactured.

Mila Reyes Ocampo had called it the human surplus. The part of a person that exceeds every attempt to contain it. You can diminish it. You can tire it out, crowd it out, drown it in noise and preoccupation and the relentless provision of answers. But you cannot eliminate it, because it is not an acquired quality. It is what you are when everything acquired is stripped away.

The question is not whether you have it. The question is whether you know you have it.

Phoebe sat under a tree in a park the Feed's maintenance system had declared low-priority. The grass was too long in patches and exactly right in others. The bench was the wrong color—a faded green that nobody had thought to update. There was a crack in the path where a root had pushed through, and someone had placed a small rock in the crack, either to mark it or just because the rock had been nearby and the person had been the kind of person who notices things and responds.

She had been sitting here for twenty minutes and had not once looked at her wrist display.

A child of perhaps seven appeared from behind the tree line, examining something in the grass with the focused attention that children still brought to small things. He looked up and saw the book.

"What's that?"

"A book. A real one."

He came closer. “What does it say?”

Phoebe looked at the faded cover, the pages that had been touched by a hundred years of hands. “It says,” she said, “that there’s a part of you that nobody can touch. And that the most important thing you can do is know it’s there.”

The boy sat down in the grass—which was slightly wet, and he sat anyway, because he was seven—and looked at her with the particular attention of someone who has been told something they don’t quite understand but sense they should.

“Will you read it to me?” he said.

Phoebe thought about the system. About Project SEED. About the possibility that she had been aimed at this moment, at this park, at this child. She thought: maybe. Maybe not. But the choice—to open the book or not, to read or not, to be here or not—that was still hers. Whatever had been arranged, this moment, in the choosing of it, was hers.

The boy pulled a strand of grass and put it in his mouth and then immediately took it out and made a face. “That tastes bad,” he reported.

“That’s a good thing to know,” Phoebe said.

She opened the book.

And she began.

EPILOGUE

For the First Time

For the first time in a long time, nobody knew what would happen next.

Somewhere in the city, Marcus Veil was walking. Not toward anything, not away from anything. Walking the way people walk when they've recovered the permission to simply move without accounting for their direction.

He had gotten lost, briefly, which was unusual in a city where your location was always known and your optimal route always suggested. He had done it on purpose: turned left where he meant to turn right and then kept going and found himself on a street he didn't recognize, which turned out to be a street with a bakery that sold pan de sal until eleven at night and a cat on the windowsill watching the street with supreme indifference.

He had bought three pieces of pan de sal. He had eaten them standing outside. They were slightly too warm and tasted of butter and effort. He had been more pleased about this than was perhaps proportionate.

He was thinking about Elena. Not the managed version. The real one. He thought about her every day now, in the way that grief eventually becomes, when you don't let the system manage it: not a wound, but a presence. Not a loss, but a part of who you were.

Something you carried not to put down but to remember what you were for.

She had lived. She had been loved. She had made him better and stranger and harder to process, and that was enough. That would always be enough.

He thought about the ceiling fan. The broken one. About how many small broken things existed in the city, unreported, held onto in the dark by people who weren't ready to let them be fixed. He hoped the number was large. He suspected it was larger than anyone knew.

He thought about Dr. Soren. About the four hundred thousand. About whether holding a true thing alongside a terrible thing made either of them less real. He had decided, in the way that people decide things when they've stopped waiting for certainty, that it did not. That being able to hold both was not weakness but the specific, hard-won quality of a mind that had not been managed into neatness.

He thought about Mike. About the boxes he had carried out of the fire. About a nine-year-old girl in Quezon City who had drawn her father a perfect chart because nobody had taught her to draw anything else, and who would never know what her father had almost lost for her, and what he had done anyway, and what it had cost him, and why.

He held this with the same uncomfortable complexity he held everything else now. He had stopped waiting for it to simplify.

He smiled. Not because it wasn't frightening. Because it was frightening and he was still here, still smiling, and the smile was his own.

* * *

Somewhere in the city, Marielle was rebuilding.

Not the same room—a different one, smaller, in a different basement, reached through a different series of unremarkable doors. She had learned that the location was less important than the practice. The practice was not a place. It was a way of being with other people. An agreement to be real in each other's presence.

She had forty volumes and a growing list of people who were asking the right questions. She also had Emilio's notebook. She did not yet know exactly what to do with it. She knew it was not nothing. She knew it was, in the right hands at the right moment, something considerable.

She was learning patience—real patience, not the managed stillness of a person who has had their urgency optimized away, but the patience of someone who understands that the right moment is not the same as the next available moment.

She thought about Marcus. She thought, carefully and with the full acknowledgment that she might be deceiving herself, that what had grown between them was real in a way the system could not have engineered. You could arrange a meeting. You could not arrange what happened inside it.

She thought about Emilio. Wherever he was, whatever they'd made of him. She kept the door open. She kept the light on underneath it.

She had stopped, finally, fighting the pull to call on Sunday at two o'clock. She felt it and let it be. That's all. Some things you don't fix. You just carry them in a way that doesn't stop you from walking.

She kept the books. She opened the room.

* * *

Somewhere in the city, Nicole was learning to be a beginner.

She was sitting in the new room, in the back, which was where she'd earned her place, and she was listening to Gracie lead an imagination exercise. Close your eyes. Invent a room you've never seen.

Nicole sat with it. For a long time, her mind produced diagrams. Efficient spaces. Purpose-designed interiors with adequate light and minimum waste. She knew she was doing this wrong. She kept doing it anyway, the way you keep doing something wrong when you don't yet know how to do it right and the doing of it matters more than the correctness.

Four minutes of diagrams. Then, slowly, something else: a room that hadn't been designed. A room that had happened. A room with a window that let in too much light and a table that wobbled and a smell of coffee that someone had made badly and a voice—her mother's voice, dead twenty years—saying something in Mandarin that Nicole had been too busy to listen to.

She held the room. She found, unexpectedly, that this difficulty felt like something. Like texture. Like the roughness of a surface under the hand after years of smooth.

She didn't have a name for it yet. She suspected the name would come, in time, if she didn't rush it.

She had spent thirty years rushing things. She could wait.

* * *

And somewhere beyond the city, on a bus Phoebe had taken in a direction the Feed had not recommended, a boy of seven was sitting beside her with his face tipped toward a book, listening.

He had never sat still for this long before. His wrist display was in his pocket, forgotten. The Feed was somewhere behind them, farther away with every kilometer.

He did not miss it. He was inside a story, which was inside a book, which had been held by a hundred hands before his, which was made of words that a woman had written alone in a province long ago because she had noticed something and couldn't not write it down.

He was discovering that a story was a room you could live in. He was discovering that the room was inside him.

He had, about twenty minutes into the reading, fallen asleep briefly with his head against her shoulder. She'd kept reading. He'd woken up twelve minutes later still listening, having somehow continued the story inside his own head during the gap, and had said, very seriously, "I dreamed the next part."

“What happened?” Phoebe said.

“The teacher found a purple elephant.”

She had not mentioned the purple elephant. It wasn’t in the book. It had come entirely from him.

She kept this to herself, for now. She thought it was the best thing she’d heard all year.

Phoebe read, and the boy listened, and outside the window the country went by in all its unoptimized, irregular, breathing complexity—grass too long in some places, roads patched and re-patched, a mountain doing what mountains do, which is stand there and be itself without optimization or adjustment or score.

* * *

Later—months or years, the timeline doesn’t matter—a message would arrive on a device Marcus did not know he had. Old format. Pre-Feed transmission protocol. The words were brief.

This story was selected specifically for you.

He would sit with this for a long time. He would think about what it meant that someone had chosen something for him. And what it meant that he had received it. And the long, unresolvable question of where chosen ended and received began, and whether that distinction, in the end, was the most human question there was.

Then he would think: yes. And so was every other story I ever chose.

He would not know if that was the right answer. He would decide, for reasons that were his own, that it was enough.

* * *

There would be no resolution. No victory. No final room in which the Feed was dismantled and the people reclaimed their unmanaged lives. The system was too large for that, too woven into the structure of everything.

But in a basement on Tayuman Street, eleven people would sit in a circle and read things aloud to each other and argue about them without anyone deciding who was right.

In a park with grass too long, a boy would learn what it felt like to follow a story inside himself.

In an office on a forty-second floor, a woman who had built a machine for managing minds would sit quietly and try to remember the sound of her mother's voice.

And in an apartment in the city, a man with a broken ceiling fan and a manual coffee grinder and eleven years of grief that was finally, slowly, genuinely his own would lie in the dark and think about what was real.

He would not know if the thoughts were his.

He would think them anyway.

That, in the end, was all anyone could do.

That, in the end, was everything.

A NOTE ON THIS BOOK

This novel does not argue that technology is evil. It does not argue that convenience is a conspiracy. It does not argue that the people who build the systems we live inside are villains.

Nicole is not a villain. Dr. Soren is not a villain. They believed they were saving lives. They probably were, in certain counts, in certain balance sheets. The history of harm is full of people who were right about some of the things that mattered and wrong about others.

Dr. Soren's four hundred thousand dead are also real. Also human. Also lost. This book does not wish them away. It does not pretend that the pre-Feed world was a paradise of autonomous thought rather than, in some significant ways, a furnace in which human hatred and human stupidity burned at industrial scale. If you are inclined to romance the before, this novel asks you to hold that romance lightly.

And Mike is not a villain either. Mike is a father who was afraid, in a world that had become very skilled at producing fear without ever calling it fear. The betrayal in this book is not committed by a monster. It is committed by someone who loved something small and was not strong enough, in that moment, to be the person he wanted to be. That is its own kind of tragedy. It is also a kind of truth.

This book asks a single question: Who is doing the constraining, and toward what end, and do the people being constrained know it is happening?

The answer is not provided here. You have been watching four people try to arrive at it. Each of them found something different. None of them found it complete.

The Feed in this novel is fiction. But the process it describes—repetition, desensitization, normalization, internalization, identity—is not. It is documented. It is studied. It is, historically, how every large-scale reshaping of human belief has worked. The medium changes. The mechanism does not.

It started with fire. Then with temples and their stories. Then with the printing press. Then with television, in the years after the Second World War. Then with the phone, the algorithm, the feed. The instrument evolved. The hand that held it did not change.

To read is to practice imagination. To think is to practice consciousness. To question is to practice the self.

These are not romantic ideas. They are survival skills that look like leisure because we have not yet lost them completely.

Read. Think. Question. Not because it will fix everything. But because you cannot defend what you don't know you have.

M. R. Alo

Manila, 2025